

# Precision Monthly

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## Homeownership Rate Spikes During Quarantine

The U.S. homeownership rate jumped by 2.6% in the second quarter of 2020, the largest quarterly increase on record, bringing it to a level last seen in 2008. Part of this unexpected increase may be due to a change in the survey process because of the coronavirus, as well as a drop in the number of rental units as renters moved in with family or took on roommates. However, many renters bought homes, spurred by low mortgage rates.

Homeownership increased across all age groups, but the biggest jump was among those under age 35, whose 40.6% rate was the highest in almost 12 years. Americans age 65 and older have the highest rate of homeownership at 80.4%.



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020; Bloomberg, July 28, 2020; MarketWatch, July 29, 2020

# Year-End 2020 Tax Tips

Here are some things to consider as you weigh potential tax moves before the end of the year.

## Defer income to next year

Consider opportunities to defer income to 2021, particularly if you think you may be in a lower tax bracket then. For example, you may be able to defer a year-end bonus or delay the collection of business debts, rents, and payments for services in order to postpone payment of tax on the income until next year.

## Accelerate deductions

Look for opportunities to accelerate deductions into the current tax year. If you itemize deductions, making payments for deductible expenses such as medical expenses, qualifying interest, and state taxes before the end of the year (instead of paying them in early 2021) could make a difference on your 2020 return.

## Make deductible charitable contributions

If you itemize deductions on your federal income tax return, you can generally deduct charitable contributions, but the deduction is limited to 60%, 30%, or 20% of your adjusted gross income (AGI), depending on the type of property that you give and the type of organization to which you contribute. (Excess amounts can be carried over for up to five years.) For 2020 charitable gifts, the normal rules have been enhanced: The limit is increased to 100% of AGI for direct cash gifts to public charities. And even if you don't itemize deductions, you can receive a \$300 charitable deduction for direct cash gifts to public charities (in addition to the standard deduction).

## Bump up withholding

If it looks as though you're going to owe federal income tax for the year, consider increasing your withholding on Form W-4 for the remainder of the year to cover the shortfall. The biggest advantage in doing so is that withholding is considered as having been paid evenly throughout the year instead of when the dollars are actually taken from your paycheck.

## Maximize retirement savings

Deductible contributions to a traditional IRA and pre-tax contributions to an employer-sponsored retirement plan such as a 401(k) can reduce your 2020 taxable income. If you haven't already contributed up to the maximum amount allowed, consider doing so. For 2020, you can contribute up to \$19,500 to a 401(k) plan (\$26,000 if you're age 50 or older) and up to \$6,000 to traditional and Roth\* IRAs combined (\$7,000 if you're age 50 or older). The window to make 2020 contributions to an employer plan generally closes at the end of the year, while you have until April 15, 2021, to make 2020 IRA contributions. (\*Roth contributions are not deductible, but Roth qualified distributions are not taxable.)

## Avoid RMDs in 2020

Normally, once you reach age 70½ (age 72 if you reach age 70½ after 2019), you generally must start taking required minimum distributions (RMDs) from traditional IRAs and employer-sponsored retirement plans. Distributions are also generally required to beneficiaries after the death of the IRA owner or plan participant. However, recent legislation has waived RMDs from IRAs and most employer retirement plans for 2020 and you don't have to take such distributions. If you have already taken a distribution for 2020 that is not required, you may be able to roll it over to an eligible retirement plan.

## Weigh year-end investment moves

Though you shouldn't let tax considerations drive your investment decisions, it's worth considering the tax implications of any year-end investment moves. For example, if you have realized net capital gains from selling securities at a profit, you might avoid being taxed on some or all of those gains by selling losing positions. Any losses above the amount of your gains can be used to offset up to \$3,000 of ordinary income (\$1,500 if your filing status is married filing separately) or carried forward to reduce your taxes in future years.

## More to Consider

Here are some other things you may want to consider as part of your year-end tax review.

### Consider postponing income and/or accelerating deductions if



You expect to be in a lower tax bracket next year (perhaps you'll retire next year)



Your itemized deductions are greater than the standard deduction this year



You want to delay payment of tax

### Consider accelerating income and/or postponing deductions if



You expect to be in a higher tax bracket next year (perhaps you have reduced income this year)



The standard deduction is greater than your itemized deductions this year



You're subject to alternative minimum tax this year and certain deductions are disallowed

# Is Now a Good Time to Consider a Roth Conversion?

This year has been challenging on many fronts, but one financial opportunity may have emerged from the economic turbulence. If you've been thinking about converting your traditional IRA to a Roth, now might be an appropriate time to do so.

## Conversion Basics

Roth IRAs offer tax-free income in retirement. Contributions to a Roth IRA are not tax-deductible, but qualified withdrawals, including any earnings, are free of federal income tax. Such withdrawals may also be free of any state income tax that would apply to retirement plan distributions.

Generally, a Roth distribution is considered "qualified" if it meets a five-year holding requirement and you are age 59½ or older, become permanently disabled, or die (other exceptions may apply).

Regardless of your filing status or how much you earn, you can convert assets in a traditional IRA to a Roth IRA. Though annual IRA contribution limits are relatively low (\$6,000 to all IRAs combined in 2020, or \$7,000 if you are age 50 or older), there is no limit to the amount you can convert or the number of conversions you can make during a calendar year. An inherited traditional IRA cannot be converted to a Roth, but a spouse beneficiary who treats an inherited IRA as his or her own can convert the assets.

Converted assets are subject to federal income tax in the year of conversion and may also be subject to state taxes. This could result in a substantial tax bill, depending on the value of your account, and could move you into a higher tax bracket. However, if all conditions are met, the Roth account will incur no further income tax liability and you won't be subject to required minimum distributions. (Designated beneficiaries are required to take withdrawals based on certain rules and time frames, depending on their age and relationship to the original account holder, but such withdrawals would be free of federal tax.)

## Why Now?

Comparatively low income tax rates combined with the impact of the economic downturn might make this an appropriate time to consider a Roth conversion.

The lower income tax rates passed in 2017 are scheduled to expire at year-end 2025; however, some industry observers have noted that taxes may rise even sooner due to rising deficits exacerbated by the pandemic relief measures.

Moreover, if the value of your IRA remains below its pre-pandemic value, the tax obligation on your conversion will be lower than if you had converted prior to the downturn. If your income is lower in 2020 due to the economic challenges, your tax rate could be lower as well.

Any or all of these factors may make it worth considering a Roth conversion, provided you have the funds available to cover the tax obligation.

As long as your traditional and Roth IRAs are with the same provider, you can typically transfer shares from one account to the other. When share prices are lower, as they may be in the current market environment, you could theoretically convert more shares for each dollar and would have more shares in your Roth account to pursue tax-free growth. Of course, there is also a risk that the converted assets will go down in value.

## Using Conversions to Make "Annual Contributions"

Finally, if you are not eligible to contribute to a Roth IRA because your modified adjusted gross income (MAGI) is too high (see table), a Roth conversion may offer a workaround. You can make nondeductible contributions to a traditional IRA and then convert traditional IRA assets to a Roth. This is often called a "back-door" Roth IRA.

As this history-making year approaches its end, this is a good time to think about last-minute moves that might benefit your financial and tax situation. A Roth conversion could be an appropriate strategy.

*All investing involves risk, including the possible loss of principal, and there is no guarantee that any investment strategy will be successful.*

If your federal tax filing status is:	Your 2020 Roth contribution is reduced if your MAGI is:	You can't contribute to a Roth IRA for 2020 if your MAGI is:
Single or head of household	More than \$124,000 but less than \$139,000	\$139,000 or more
Married filing jointly or qualifying widow(er)	More than \$196,000 but less than \$206,000	\$206,000 or more
Married filing separately	More than \$0 but less than \$10,000	\$10,000 or more

*Note that your contributions generally cannot exceed earned income for the year. (Special rules apply to spousal IRAs.)*

# Lessons from the Lockdown: A Back-to-Basics Holiday

If there is one thing the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders demonstrated, it was the need to find joy in simple pleasures. In fact, 43% of respondents to one survey said they had "changed their ways for the better" as a result of the lockdown.<sup>1</sup> By applying some of the lessons learned from pandemic purgatory to the holiday season, families may be able to create new and meaningful traditions while saving money.

**Travel.** While confined to their homes for several months, people discovered the benefits of virtual get-togethers via video calls. The same survey cited above found that many people who used videoconferencing technology reported that they connected more with loved ones during the lockdown than before restrictions were put into place.<sup>2</sup> This holiday season, if you can't be with your loved ones, consider scheduling a virtual gathering to open gifts or share a meal together. An added benefit of less time and money spent on travel could be lower stress overall.

**Experience vs. "stuff."** Of course, sharing experiences in person can be more rewarding than a video chat. Stay-at-home orders prompted many people to reflect on how much they took for granted, especially the opportunity simply to spend time with loved ones they don't see on a regular basis. As many grandparents would likely contend, time spent with family can be a much more valuable gift than the latest gadget or fashion trend. Moreover, while in lockdown,

many families discovered they could actually live without many of the material goods they purchase on a regular basis. Rather than spending a lot on "stuff" this season, consider intentionally downsizing the piles of gifts exchanged and focusing more on the shared celebrations and traditions.

*In April 2020, during the height of the stay-at-home orders, the nation's personal savings rate hit an all-time high of 32%.<sup>3</sup>*

**Food.** During the lockdown, many people rediscovered the simple joy of preparing and eating home-cooked meals and baked goods. And because ingredients were often limited due to supply-chain disruptions, creativity became a valuable kitchen skill. This holiday season, instead of spending a small fortune dining out, why not put some of that pandemic culinary prowess to work? Simple meals that the whole family helps prepare can be cost-effective as well as memory-making. Wrapped up with a beautiful bow, your creations can also make thoughtful, inexpensive, edible gifts. (You might also consider supporting local businesses by having food gifts delivered or purchasing gift cards.)

1-2) OnePoll, studyfinds.org, May 23, 2020; 3) U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, June 30, 2020

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